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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines aspects of teaching-assistant programs that make them beneficial to graduate students and to the undergraduates they teach; it then examines faults of the teaching-assistant concept and discusses the original assumptions on which the concept was based. The paper predicts the demise of the teaching-assistant concept in the next quarter century, noting that increasing cuts in educational funding, due to legislative and public disillusionment with current educational programs, will cause the teaching-assistant program to become a luxury that universities cannot afford. The conclusion of the paper laments the predicted end of the teaching-assistant program and offers predictions about the nature of future graduate programs and about the types of financial assistance that will be available to future graduate students. (GW)

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Teaching Assistants in the New Century

I realize that in any discussion of teaching assistants one should probably address himself to immediate needs--that is, techniques of motivating students, devising paper topics, and the sundry day-to-day considerations that the young teacher needs to know.

I would however like to direct my several comments to the dual time periods suggested by the topic "Teaching Assistants in the New Century." I assume that "new century" is ambiguous and can refer to either the present third-hundred years of the United States or to the twenty-first century, beginning 23 years hence. Thus, I hesitantly offer a few observations about the present state of the teaching assistant program and about what I think it will be a quarter-century from now.

First of all I must admit bias in favor of the teaching assistant concept. I personally benefitted from it both financially and experientially as a graduate student/teacher; and I presently direct a program which includes approximately thirty teaching assistants. With one or two inevitable exceptions, the members of this group are active, dedicated teachers, doing as good a job in the basic English courses as can be done. Facing one of the most difficult teaching assignments in the university, these TA's not only endure but occasionally even prevail. Perhaps I am fortunate and work with an unusual calibre of teaching assistant. But I do not think so. I believe that as a rule what I have said about my own teaching assistants applies to TA programs across the country.

The virtues of the TA program are well known, and I need not rehearse them overly much. The system allows the university to teach a great number of undergraduate students economically, and it allows a great number of graduate students

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to support themselves while receiving both a degree and on-the-job training. Without the system, states would have to allot considerably more money than they do; professors would have to teach more students than they do; and the size of the basic English class would be even more gross than it is. Moreover, the graduate program would shrink as if on a diet of split infinitives, since the graduate students would not be present to feed it.

A somewhat less pragmatic virtue is that often the lower-division student responds more readily to the young graduate teacher than to the professor. I do not mean to imply that the freshmen produce better work for the teaching assistant, but at least they are sometimes more at ease with their ignorance and uncertainties when they are sharing them with a teacher who is also a student and who is chronologically nearer to them.

The faults of the teaching assistant system are not so much intrinsic as extraneous. That is, the problems with the TA concept are not part of the system per se but come from the attitudes with which the system is used. The teaching assistant idea has been with us so long that we have been lulled into thinking that it will always be with us. Consequently, we tend to abuse it.

Unfortunately, we do not often think through our attitude toward the program. The truth is that the English department and the university seldom give any overt indication to the assistants that they are performing a worthwhile service. Too often the exuberant neophyte teacher is thrown into a situation which is discouraging, occasionally humiliating. Not only are the freshman classes physically and psychologically demanding, the assistant is shown little or no motive for teaching them. We seem to have accepted as gospel the preachment that Johnny can neither read nor write. Consequently we think that even though somebody has to deal with Johnny, we prefer that it not be us. Thus many senior faculty members approach the teaching of basic English with all the enthusiasm of a smallpox vaccination. This attitude, obviously, is quickly perceived by the graduate student teacher.

And should a graduate student express a pedagogical leaning, as opposed to a speciality in Milton or American Lit, he is considered distinctly strange. A survey recently conducted by one of my colleagues, for instance, indicated that 50 out of 100 universities would not allow a graduate student to write a dissertation on a pedagogical problem or topic. And many out of the other 50% would consider such a request peculiar.

Moreover, the teaching assistant soon learns that disciplines outside the English Department do little or nothing to reinforce the ideas of good composition. Most of the other disciplines do the proper lip service to "good writing," but in fact they look upon freshman English as they look upon mosquito bites: annoying but not fatal, and something which quickly can be forgotten.

Caught between many freshman students who themselves resent having to take the courses and senior faculty members who implicitly if not overtly disparage the courses, the teaching assistant has to feel a bit alienated. Little wonder, then, that many of the assistants who come into the program with high hopes and enthusiasm end up by viewing their teaching duties as a form of indentured servitude that they must endure while enroute to becoming "scholars." The irony is that once the assistant has graduated, armed with a dissertation entitled something like "Irregular Odes During the Time of Richard Roll of Hampole" and still smarting from pats on the back from well-meaning professors, he or she will nonetheless spend the first years of the full-time teaching career in the basic English course--assuming that any job at all is available.

In short, the teaching assistant system is today too often a process through which the graduate student learns to give up idealistic hopes and comes to face the harsh realities of the academic world.

Paradoxically, the teaching assistant concept is in many respects the product of an era different from today--a bygone era which, for the university at least, was calmer, more secure, less demanding, happier.

Despite the fact that every teaching assistant occasionally feels exploited,

put-upon, and pee-ohhed, the system nonetheless originated in benevolence, a throwback perhaps to the era of academic nobless oblige--when the older, more established members of the teaching profession felt moved to take care of the newer, poorer members. The basic assumption with which the "haves" viewed the system was that each young aspiring teacher was an individual truly interested in the university and in the profession of writing, literature, and pedagogy. There was never any promise of riches, not much hope for fame--merely perhaps a recollection of Chaucer's idealistic Oxford clerk: "And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach." And the fact that the system was economically beneficial to all was hardly a major concern.

I don't have the time, ability, or desire to outline all the sociological, economic, militaristic, and legalistic processes which have spelled the demise of such an era and of such good feelings; but I do think that they are moribund if not dead; and the teaching assistant concept is a comforting reminder of the past, like a 1939 Plymouth or a rerun of "Goodbye, Mr. Chips."

If I had to choose one word which suggested why the teaching assistant concept cannot last into the twenty-first century, I would choose "economics"--fully realizing that entailed in that word are connotations of disillusions, disappointments, and rude awakenings of a country made tense by the depletion of oil, the deterioration of the environment, the corruption of its government, and a hundred other harsh realities that are daily brought to its attention.

But it is ironic that the teaching assistant concept, so steeped in a tradition of economic beneficience for all parties involved, is fast becoming a luxury we cannot afford. A further irony is that in trying to save money on one end, the state legislators and others who control the academic purses are on the other end killing one of the soundest dollar-and-cents programs: the teaching assistantship.

I do not think anyone would disagree that legislators and boards of regents are scrutinizing closer and closer the money they put into the education system. For better or worse, our society operates with a monetary heart. The feeling is

that if General Motors can put X number of dollars into a factory, out come Y number of cars and Z amount of profit. The success of the operation can be shown very convincingly on ledger sheets and in the showroom windows full of Chevrolets, Buicks, and Cadillac Coupe de Villes. Many people see the university as a factory: the taxpayers put in X number of dollars; the university turns out Y number of graduates. The missing factor is the demonstratable profit, the measurable return. Unlike General Motors, the university's raw materials--the entering students--are not uniform, not predictable. Yet, somehow the public seems to think that our products should all come out the same, stamped "certified" and ready for the showroom.

Because we cannot offer such proof and because the media has of late made so many unanswered charges about Johnny not being able to read, the legislators and the public have grown suspicious and a bit intolerant. Whatever the causes, there are many things other than education that America had rather spend its money on. We will finance education so long as it does not deprive us of anything else; but at the first signs of economic tightness, education and educationists became ready targets for blame and punishment. The germane point here is that the university is going to be forced to handle more and more students with fewer teachers. Gone are the days when the Miltonist could teach one graduate seminar on Tuesday and ivory-tower it for the rest of the week. The professor who in the past taught a three-hour load will soon have to teach a nine- or twelve-hour load --for the same salary. My own state will soon put into law a provision concerning state universities which provides that ~~(quote)~~ "no funds shall be paid to any full-time faculty member who does not teach at least nine semester credit hours of organized undergraduate classroom courses each long-term semester or six semester credit or a combination of six semester credit hours of organized undergraduate and three semester credit hours of graduate courses." Another similar bill seeks to limit severely the number of teaching assistants that a state university can employ and has provisions for salary deductions for full-time teachers who do not fulfill the course load requirements.

I think that such laws will soon be the rule instead of the exception; and since undergraduate enrollment is not going to increase, the students which the professor needs to complete his nine or twelve hour load must come from somewhere. Not much imagination is needed to guess where the somewhere is: the students will come from those classes now conducted by the teaching assistants.

Thus we will soon find that the teaching assistant--once thought to be so essential to the university system--is suddenly expendable. The irony is that in trying to legislate heavier work schedules for professors, in trying to make sure that the taxpayer gets a dollar's worth of service for a dollar's worth of taxes, the legislators force out of existence one of the readiest, most willing, and most economical sources of young teachers. By the twenty-first century the teaching assistant system as we know it will be as obsolete as the slate and the hornbook.

Two obvious questions thus arise: what will happen to the graduate programs and how will the new teachers be trained?

As for the graduate program, particularly in English and generally in the liberal arts, they will cease to exist in their present form. First of all, the enrollment will be much smaller, consisting only of those students who can somehow afford the costs and who are bent upon acquiring advanced degrees. Instead of being the primary concern of a department--as it now too often is--the graduate program will become an adjunct to the undergraduate program.

The primary impetus of graduate study will be pedagogy. Once in the graduate program, the student will spend most of the time learning to teach a speciality language, that is, English for Engineers, English for Lawyers, English for Literature Teachers, or whatever. Certainly the graduate student will not be given a freshman class to conduct--primarily because the freshman classes themselves will be subdivided into speciality training and will demand specially trained teachers, but also because every freshman student will be needed to complete the professor's required load.

The teacher training of the graduate students will be conducted in lab classes, similiar to the lab schools now run by many universities for the training of secondary/elementary school teachers. The graduate student will not be permitted to conduct classes independently until the graduate studies have been completed and he or she is hired specifically to teach.

I suspect--but do not particularly like to contemplate--that the financing for this advanced study will come primarily from federal and state government determination. As I suggested, we will turn from the specialist as we now know him--that is, the Miltonist or the Eighteenth-Centurist--and have specialists of another sort: specialists to teach reading and writing to potential engineers, lawyers, and such. A potential graduate student will apply for funds to finance advanced studies in a certain speciality, and somewhere in Washington or the state capitol an agency will determine whether or not that student is to be financed in such studies.

I do not mean to imply that I approve of or happily await these conditions. Quite the contrary. I personally had rather see a return to a more humanized, less legalistic approach to higher education. I would like to see the American idea of the university redefined and America's concept of education changed. I would like to see a cessation of the feeling that everything must be controlled and regulated and that the more we are controlled and regulated the better we are. And I particularly hate to see the demise of the teaching assistant method for financing and training new teachers. Yet, I must believe that the trend is toward more specialized, more pragmatic training. . .and among other unpleasant things, that trend means the end of the teaching assistant system.